



A 2021 Teamster Election Primer: Gangsters, Reformers, and Socialists in the Teamsters. A Reading List by Joe Allen

The 2021 Teamster election is well under way. After two decades in power James P. Hoffa, Jr. will not be running for reelection but there is a real contest for who will succeed him. The Teamsters are one of the few major unions where the rank and file directly elect their top officers, so it is up to the members to decide. The campaign should produce a

vigorous and honest discussion of the Teamsters future. Currently, there are three candidates to replace Hoffa: [Sean O'Brien](#), [Steve Vairma](#), and [Chris Silvera](#). The leadership that the ranks choose and the direction in which the Teamsters go will have a major impact on the established labor movement.

The Teamsters hold a special place in U.S. culture and for socialist organizing. “The Teamsters union has been home to the most-organized and long-term presence of both mobsters and socialists in the American labor movement,” wrote Danny Katch, a former [Teamster](#) and Haymarket author, in the [Independent](#) early this year. Many unions have had mobsters and others socialists but few have had both play such an important role. The struggle between these contending forces at crucial moments played an important role in shaping modern history of the Teamsters.

The Teamsters like to [boast](#) that they are “America’s strongest union.” It’s hard to take this seriously. The Teamsters organizational strength peaked in the mid-1970s with around 2.2 million members. Today, it hovers around 1.4 million weakened by four decades of concessions. Back in the 1970s , the Teamsters boasted they were the “Largest union in the Free World.” The union was not so free, however. It was ruled by a violent Mafia-approved

officialdom. Jimmy Hoffa, its most infamous leader, was murdered in 1975 in an ill-conceived effort to regain control of the union leadership after he was imprisoned for jury tampering. Hoffa's disappearance' refocused attention on the union's corruption

Despite the Teamsters decline from its peak strength in the 1970s, it remains potentially the most powerful transport union in North America. I say "potentially" because that potential hasn't been used in a long time. The 1997 UPS Strike demonstrated a long dormant strength but that was nearly a quarter of a century ago. There are other unions that represent workers involved in the transport of [people](#) or [goods](#), and have admirable [records](#), but what makes the Teamsters different is that it continues to represent about 300,000 workers at United Parcel Service (UPS), the largest logistics company in the world. UPS moves six percent of the U.S. GDP every day and two percent of the world's economy.

Meanwhile, a hidden potential strength is the [Teamster Rail Conference](#) that represents "more than 70,000 rail employees in the United States who work on the five major freight railroads, Amtrak and numerous commuter rail systems and short line," according to the union's website. Teamster locomotive engineers, trainmen and maintenance

of way workers could shut down the entire economy of North America overnight. While The Teamsters nearly collapsed in the freight industry following the deregulation of the trucking, major freight companies, they still represent tens of thousands of workers at companies such as [YRC](#) and [ABF](#).

Today, while [corruption](#) is still too widespread, the Teamsters are no longer controlled by the Mafia. Socialists may not have the organized presence they once did, but an interest in [socialist politics](#) is greater than any time in the last forty years. For Hollywood, the Teamsters are the gift that keeps on giving. Last year Netflix released for the holiday season, Martin Scorsese's epic film [The Irishman](#) to much acclaim and riveted viewers. Whether Teamsters needed another blood-soaked drama about the Teamsters is doubtful, but it did rekindle an interest in the union's history.

Below is a wide ranging reading list covering Teamster history, dissent, forecasts, and results. Many of the books listed are available in public libraries and universities, or could be purchased from on-line retailers or bookstores. Almost all of the articles listed are also available on-line or through your public library website. I've tried to highlight not only the big stories — like the 1997 UPS strike — but also the debates that raged at important turning points in the history of the union and the reform movement.

The many books and articles listed here represent a diversity of historical and political opinions concerning Teamster history, and the direction of various efforts at reforming the Teamsters. Debates, sometimes very sharp debates, about the direction of the Teamsters and the Teamster reform movement, best represented by the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), were a regular feature of political discussion. Many times socialists found themselves taking different positions on key political questions.

Readers shouldn't feel obliged to start from the beginning and try to tackle it all but pick what subject or debate interests you. You will be surprised where it takes you. I hope comrades find this useful guide to the issues that will come to the forefront of the 2021 campaign.

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